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HOLOCAUST REMEMBRANCE DAY

The quest for paintings from a lost Jewish world

Elizabeth Rynecki attempts to locate her great-grandfather Moshe's art, so that while he perished in the Holocaust, his story may live

BY [CATHRYN PRINCE](#) January 27, 2014, 6:12 pm 1



“I am haunted by a past that isn’t even my own,” Elizabeth Rynecki said from her Oakland, California home.

Except of course it is her past. In fact, Rynecki’s story is more than the story of one family torn asunder by the Holocaust. Indeed, the story of her great-grandfather and his paintings is the story of a culture lost and found.

Moshe Rynecki, who lived in Warsaw, Poland, produced more than 800 works. He painted religious scenes, daily life and ultimately, scenes from inside the Warsaw Ghetto. “Ice Skaters” shows a free spirited couple waltzing on ice. “Praying in the Synagogue” shows men wrapped in tallit, heads bent over prayer books. “Forced Labor” depicts Jews hammering rocks under the stares of Nazi guards.

“A lot of the art work that is gone or remains missing was important work, but it didn’t necessarily reflect life in the Jewish community,” Rynecki said. “Moshe’s pieces add another layer to Holocaust-era art. Aesthetically beautiful, they documented this world that’s now gone.”

When Germany invaded Poland in 1939 Moshe Rynecki realized his life and his life's work were in peril. He packed his paintings in separate bundles and parceled them out to non-Jewish friends. He also gave two of his children, George and Chaya, a list of the paintings' locations.

Moshe Rynecki died in the Nazi concentration camp Majdanek, near Lublin, Poland. George survived the war, but Chaya, was killed in Warsaw. After the war George and his mother found two bundles of art in a town outside of Warsaw. They brought those paintings to the United States when they emigrated.



'Ice Skaters,' no date, Watercolor, 35×50 cm (Image courtesy of the Rynecki family)

Elizabeth Rynecki grew up in Oakland, California, her great-grandfather's work adorning the walls of her home. Still, she didn't realize its importance until the early 1980s when a local museum put on a show of his paintings.

"It was the first time I realized his art was a big thing and that others really cared about it," Rynecki said.

Then Elizabeth's grandfather George died in the early 1990s. While cleaning out his home and car, Elizabeth and her father discovered George's wartime memoir.

"We cannot and will not forget. We will carry it, like the Bible, forever. There are hundreds of books on the subject," wrote George Rynecki of the Holocaust. "Nevertheless, I am a Jew and I write. I'll do it till the end of my days. If only for my granddaughter, Elizabeth, to know the truth, and not to be afraid of it."



'The Wedding (The First Dance),' 1919, Oil on parchment, 32.2 x 87.4 cm (image courtesy of the Rynecki family)

After reading his memoir, Elizabeth Rynecki vowed to locate the remaining paintings. She became family archivist, curator and publicist.

“I had to tell people about it, to share my search and his work with others,” she said.

Moshe Rynecki was born in 1881 to a large Hassidic family. After completing yeshiva, he enrolled in art school. It was unusual for an Orthodox Jew to enter the secular world of art, but he'd displayed a talent from a very young age, said Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett, Program Director of the Core Exhibition, Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw.

“To do [enroll in school] that was to undergo a transformation,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett said. And yet, as his paintings reveal, Rynecki successfully straddled the religious and secular world.



'The Chess Players,' no date, watercolor, 31.5 x 48.3 cm (image courtesy of the Rynecki family)

His paintings depict seamstresses bent over piecework, a couple under the chuppah, men chatting on a park bench. Throughout his career Rynecki captured Jewish life through his brush strokes. His was world of movement and quiet contemplation, of joy and sorrow.

“He draws from a deep well of the world he left behind. His great gift as an artist is to capture the spirit. His paintings are more about mood, feeling and atmosphere,” Kirshenblatt-Gimblett said, adding that the museum will show a high-quality digital reproduction of a Rynecki painting as part of its permanent exhibition.

Soon after Rynecki launched a website chronicling her great-grandfather's life and work the calls came. Some told her they had a painting or two. Others told her of Rynecki paintings hanging in museums. Slowly Elizabeth Rynecki discovered more of her great-grandfather's work.

'I had to tell people about it, to share my search and his work with others'

In the past year Rynecki has made significant progress. For example, in 2013 Rynecki went to give a lecture about her great-grandfather at the University of Toronto.

Before the lecture Barry Dov Walfish, the university's Judaica expert, looked Moshe Rynecki up in the Schneid Archive. Otto Schneid was working on a book on Modern Jewish art before the war. He collected autobiographies and photos of the works of many European Jewish painters.

"I found that it contained photos of quite a few of his [Rynecki] paintings as well as [handwritten letters](#) by him to Otto Schneid," Walfish said, adding that "Schneid's archive can help identify missing works of art by painters who died in the Holocaust."

Elizabeth Rynecki examined the papers. She was delighted to see 13 black and white photos of paintings she hadn't known existed. But even more moving were the several letters in her great-grandfather's hand.

SWIATOWID



RYNECKI: Modlitwa

'Modlitwa w synagodze.' Whereabouts of the original painting are unknown (Photo Courtesy of the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto)

“To see his signature at the bottom of the page, to read the return address on the label; it adds a whole other dimension to his life. It made it more real,” Rynecki said.

The search for Moshe Rynecki’s lost art highlights the relationship between war and art. However, Rynecki isn’t interested in making claims on the art. She said she simply wants to fill in the gaps, to locate her great-grandfather’s art so his story lives.

Last June Rynecki, received photographs of seven Moshe Rynecki paintings owned by a woman in Israel. According to Rynecki she’s the aunt of a Canadian man whose parents were partisan fighters during World War II. They bought a bundle of her great-grandfather’s paintings after the war.

Additionally, after some discussion, the Jewish Historical Institute in Warsaw sent her photographs of 17 of 52 Moshe Rynecki paintings in their collection.

Next fall Elizabeth Rynecki plans to visit Warsaw. She yearns to stand before her great-grandfather’s former house. She also plans to visit Yad Vashem in Israel where more than 10,000 pieces of art is on display. Among them is “Refugees,” one of just three works Moshe Rynecki completed while inside the Warsaw Ghetto.



'Refugees,' 1939, depicts life inside the Warsaw Ghetto. It is at Yad Vashem in its permanent collection.
42 x 57 cm., watercolor sketch, gift of the Rynecki family

Read more: [The quest for paintings from a lost Jewish world | The Times of Israel](http://www.timesofisrael.com/the-quest-for-paintings-from-a-lost-jewish-world/#ixzz35wtiaX2j) <http://www.timesofisrael.com/the-quest-for-paintings-from-a-lost-jewish-world/#ixzz35wtiaX2j>
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